Stone should film real hero story — Clay Shaw

New Orleans

Oliver Stone's diatribe on his film "JFK" (Letters, June 27) dismisses Rosemary James' account of Jim Garrison's circus trial of Clay Shaw (Letters, June 20) as "riddled with factual errors." How absurd!

It is Mr. Stone's letter that is riddled with errors. His rambling dissertation shows the same disregard for truth and reliance on fantasy that characterized Garrison's witch hunt.

This sickness, born of fear, paranoia and distrust of the federal government, the FBI, CIA and all federal agencies, incubated Garrison's "fraudulent case." Disregard for truth and contempt for individual civil rights was the poisonous brew that resulted.

As a television reporter, columnist and chief editorialist for WDSU-TV, I witnessed the humiliation heaped on Clay Shaw and the international ridicule it caused New Orleans. I'll never forget the day one of Garrison's chief investigators, the late Bill Gurvich, resigned. "Clay Shaw had nothing to do with it," he said, flatly. Plagued by his conscience and a bleeding ulcer developed "chasing Garrison's phantoms," he told me, "Garrison is hanging on to anyone and anything to keep the case open . . . and in the international press, no matter what the cost to others."

Gurvich then sought out Robert Kennedy. "What I told him, the exact words were (Gurvich wrote) 'Senator, Mr. Garrison will never shed light on your brother's death.' Earlier, Garrison's chief assistant Pershing Gervais defected, stating that Garrison had no case. He stressed the DA's "obsession with any and all conspiracy theories," an obsession Oliver Stone apparently has wholeheartedly embraced.

Garrison's witnesses were not, as Stone claims, kept from testifying by officials who refused to extradite key witnesses. He had no key witnesses. He had no hard evidence.

Stone claims Garrison's files were plundered. To the contrary, Garrison's files existed mainly in his head. Bill Gurvich revealed that Garrison's paranoid belief that the FBI bugged his every movement caused him to propose to his staff an incredible plan: an assault on the local FBI office using "red pepper guns."

One night I delivered an editorial in which we carefully assembled at least 14 separate and distinct assassination theories the great Crusader had invented, revised, espoused or discarded.

Afforded equal time on WDSU, Garrison brushed it all aside and instead cautioned me to, in the words of Mark Twain, "First get the facts, then distort them." Unfortunately, he never heeded his own counsel.

Certain facts are so grotesque that they are in themselves "distortions." Garrison's Mardi Gras of "key witnesses" was a circus sideshow of oddballs, psychopaths, grudge bearers and sensation seekers. In time, an honest and respected man's reputation was slowly eroded and finally destroyed.

After two years twisting in the wind, Clay Shaw was declared not guilty by a jury that deliberated less than half an hour. Clay Shaw died three years after the trial. He had been stripped of his reputation, his money, his position in the community, but not his pride.

If Oliver Stone sincerely "seeks the truth," he should consider telling the story of Clay Shaw's ordeal. It could be a timeless commentary on the abuse of power and the systematic destruction of an innocent man.

If Stone wants high drama, he need only review this statement from an interview I conducted with Clay Shaw after the trial:

"I often had the feeling I was living through a Kafka novel . . . the impotent anonymous, dispensable 'K' . . . unable to communicate with the Castle."

The late James Kirkwood wrote in his definitive study of Shaw's ordeal, "American Grotesque":

"Garrison cried wolf at a lamb, then slaughtered the lamb. That cry should be remembered."

Kirkwood published "American Grotesque" in 1970. He concluded this masterful piece of investigative reporting with a prophetic admonition:

"We must all watch out and speak out. Otherwise, in twenty years people will be asking, 'How did Jim Garrison ever get this far?' And the answer will be: We let him."

Mel Leavitt